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ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMICS

Progress report, including a plan of action, on the development and use of environmental indicators

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report has been prepared in response to Governing Council decision 17/22 of 21 May 1993, by which the Council requested the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to continue its work in the field of environmental indicators, in cooperation with the United Nations Statistical Office and the relevant specialized agencies, bearing in mind the role of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), and also requested the Executive Director to submit to the Council at its eighteenth regular session a progress report, including a plan of action, on the development and use of environmental indicators. The report reviews progress made in the development and use of environmental indicators and, in particular, UNEP's activities in the area. It then sets out UNEP's plan of action on indicator work.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to take note of the present report and endorse or make recommendations on the UNEP plan of action in the field of environmental and sustainable development indicators to be carried out in collaboration with other agencies and parties.

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I. PROGRESS IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS

1. Indicators are relevant to a vast number of environmental and developmental issues. They can guide data and information collection and reporting processes enabling us to better organize, synthesize and use information. They can play an important role in transforming information into action at national and international levels by providing support to problem identification, policy formulation and policy evaluation. The international acceptance and use of common or mutually compatible indicators could have added benefits such as: (i) international standardization and harmonization of the data collection processes; (ii) international compilation of national state-of-the-environment (SOE) reports and reports to forums such as the Commission on Sustainable Development; (iii) reduction of national reporting burdens.

2. Indicators are required for evaluating progress towards sustainable development at national and international levels (Agenda 21, Ch.40). As sustainable development involves the complex interaction of social, economic, institutional and environmental factors, indicators for sustainable development must reflect and incorporate these interactive forces if they are to be meaningful, reliable and useful for evaluation and predictive purposes. The United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (DPCSD), as task manager for chapter 40 of Agenda 21, and the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSTAT), with responsibility for the development of indicators are coordinating activities. Progress on developing sustainable development indicators will be presented and discussed at the third session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, in April 1995, together with a cooperative work programme of future activities being proposed to the Commission by the Secretary-General.

3. In comparison with their social and economic counterparts, environmental indicators remain less well developed, tested and less widely used at the present time and the underlying data bases are frequently less adequate. However, the development of environmental indicators has been high on the agenda of many national and international organizations in recent years.

4. UNEP's activities on indicator development have included:

(a) Publication in early 1994 of "An Overview of Environmental Indicators: State-of-the-art and perspectives";

(b) Participation in the development of criteria and indicators to guide management, conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity;

(c) Collaboration in the development of indicator-based methodologies for assessment and mapping of desertification, for evaluating projects and activities in desertification control and dryland rehabilitation and for freshwater assessment;

(d) Use of indicators in economic tools such as environmental impact assessment (EIA) and environmental and natural resource accounting and valuation;

(e) Convening, in collaboration with UNSTAT, a Consultative Expert Group on Environmental and Sustainable Development Indicators. The major purpose of the Group was to enhance, through information sharing, collaboration and integration of indicator activities. A project on highly aggregated indicators for sustainable development was set up by the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE) with the encouragement of this Group. UNEP has co-sponsored this project;

(f) Participation in the development of a menu of sustainable development indicators by DPCSD;

(g) Co-sponsoring and providing substantive inputs to a Belgian-hosted international workshop on indicators of sustainable development for decision-making, initiated by the SCOPE project. At this meeting UNEP and DPCSD presented a joint paper on "The Role of Indicators in Decision-Making". This paper, which will be available as a background document at the eighteenth session of the Council, formed the basis for a number of Workshop recommendations which will be presented to the Commission on Sustainable Development at its third session by the Governments of Belgium and Costa Rica.

II. UNEP'S PLAN OF ACTION IN INDICATORS

5. UNEP's specific plan of action in indicator work has been structured to fit within the framework of international indicator development activities whilst at the same time contributing to the need for improved information tools for UNEP's own assessment, reporting, management and policy guidance functions. It comprises four action areas:

(a) Contributions to the DPCSD-coordinated indicator work programme:

(i) Assist in the development of, and building international consensus on, a menu of indicators for evaluating progress towards sustainable development as follows:

a. Become lead actor for the preparation of methodologies for a set of specific indicators (ozone-depleting substances, mandated environmental impact assessments, the negotiation, adoption and ratification of multilateral environmental agreements, the enactment of environmental legislation and the establishment of related national institutions) and cooperate in the development of methodologies for others (including desertification, freshwater and ocean/coastal indicators);

b. Participate in a coordinated inter-agency programme on capacity-building and training for indicators use at national level using, amongst others, the regional environmental and natural resources information networks (ENRINs) of the UNEP Division of Environment Assessment (DEA);

c. Contribute to pilot country activities to apply the indicator framework (the UNEP/WHO HEADLAMP Project could provide a suitable vehicle for these activities);

(ii) Contribute to research into linkages associated with sustainable development indicators through support to a second phase of the SCOPE project and to indicator development work of the World Resources Institute and other institutes;

(iii) Continue as a member of the DPCSD/UNSTAT Task Force on Indicators which will steer the indicator development process.

(b) Development of indicators in a selected number of areas commensurate with major UNEP programmes:

(i) Continue collaboration in the activities outlined in paragraphs 4 (b), (c) and (d) above relating to the development of sectoral and economic indicators;

(ii) Collaborate in the development and use of indicators and indicator-based methodologies in all sectoral, regional and global assessments coordinated or supported by the DEA;

(iii) Collaborate in the development of a vulnerability index in support of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States;

(iv) Ensure that the developed indicators, when they pertain to national level, feed, as required, into the matrix of internationally agreed indicators, and those that pertain to global or regional level feed into UNEP assessments and reports;

(c) Promoting the use of indicators in state-of-the-environment reporting and for the organization and reporting of environmental data and information collection:

(i) Use the regional environmental and natural resources information networks of the DEA to reach consensus on indicator use;

(ii) Prepare a sourcebook for state-of-the-environment reporting (with Canadian and Dutch support) for reviewing different approaches and strategies to SOE reporting, including the use of indicators to guide the reporting;

(iii) Contribute to regional projects of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which include identification and application of regionally relevant environmental and sustainable development indicators;

(d) Promoting indicator information exchange: develop, depending on the availability of funds, an international indicator exchange network and database to raise awareness of ongoing activities amongst actors in indicator development, and facilitate the selection of appropriate indicators by users. UNEP has already identified a number of agencies prepared to collaborate in this network and database and is setting up a collaborative procedure to look at modalities and costs.